

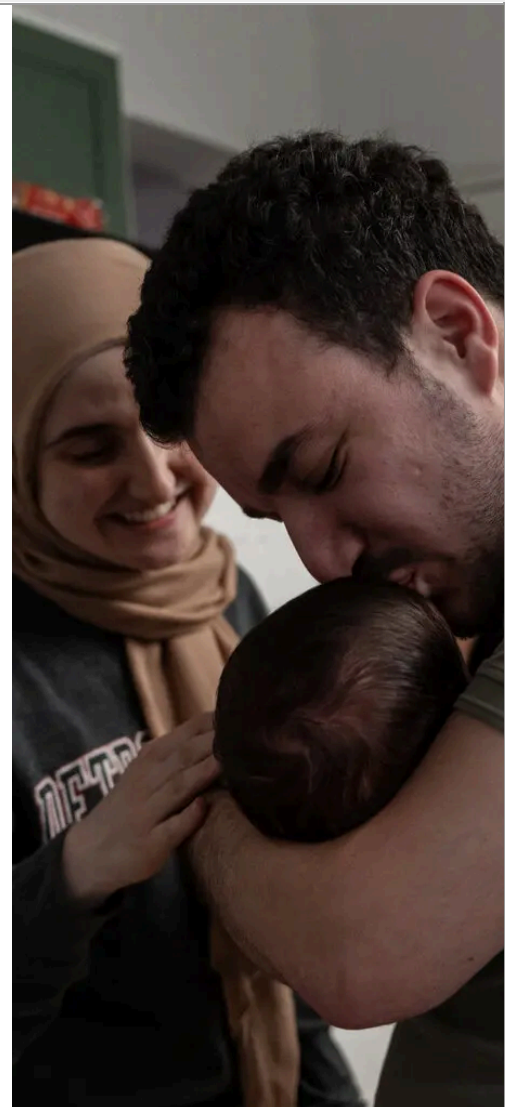
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The New York Times

‘It Felt Like Kidnapping,’ Khalil Says in First Interview Since Release

The Columbia graduate and pro-Palestinian activist returned to New York after more than three months in detention. The Trump administration is seeking to deport him.



Mahmoud Khalil said nothing can compensate the loss of missing the birth of his son. Todd Heisler/The New York Times



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By **Jonah E. Bromwich**

June 22, 2025

Mahmoud Khalil sat in a Manhattan apartment dotted with posters and signs calling for his freedom and described the moment 105 days before when plainclothes immigration agents had handcuffed him in the building lobby.

“All the ‘Know Your Rights’ information and fliers I read and familiarized myself with were useless,” Mr. Khalil said. “There are

no rights in such situations.”

“It felt like kidnapping,” he said.

Mr. Khalil, a 30-year-old Columbia University graduate and U.S. permanent resident, was the first student protester targeted and detained by the Trump administration. On Friday, after having spent more than three months in detention in Jena, La., he was released on bail.

He traveled most of the night to return to New York City, and on Saturday evening turned off a television newscast on America’s attack on Iran to speak publicly for the first time about his arrest, his detention and his plans now that he is free.

He said that if President Trump’s goal had been to suppress pro-Palestinian speech, the president had “absolutely failed.”

When he was in prison, he had received hundreds of letters from people whose interest in the Palestinian movement had been catalyzed by his case, he said.



On Columbia’s campus, Mahmoud Khalil became an interlocutor between protesters and the administration. Bing Guan for The New York Times

Citing President Trump's reported [promise to donors during the 2024 campaign](#) to set the Palestinian cause back decades, Mr. Khalil said he believed that Mr. Trump had done the opposite. "He actually advanced the movement 20 years," he said.

In a statement, a White House spokeswoman, Abigail Jackson, said Mr. Khalil's case was "not about 'free speech.'"

"This is about individuals who don't have a right to be in the United States siding with Hamas terrorists and organizing group protests that made college campuses unsafe and harassed Jewish students," she said. Allegations that Mr. Khalil expressed support for Hamas have not been substantiated in court.

"The Trump administration won't hesitate to hold Khalil, and others who mimic his tactics, accountable," she added. The administration is still seeking to deport Mr. Khalil, whose case is wending its way through immigration court.

Tricia McLaughlin, a spokeswoman for the Department of Homeland Security, said in a statement that Mr. Khalil should "self-deport" by using a [government app](#) to schedule his departure from the United States.

Mr. Khalil was never accused of a crime. Instead, Secretary of State Marco Rubio invoked a rarely cited law from the mid-20th century to deport him on the grounds that he had undermined American foreign policy. The administration argued that he had contributed to the spread of antisemitism through his role in the protests at the university.

But Mr. Khalil, a Palestinian born in a Syrian refugee camp, rejected the idea that protesting against Israel is inherently antisemitic.

"I was not doing anything antisemitic," he said. "I was literally advocating for the right of my people. I was literally advocating for an end of a genocide. I was advocating that the tuition fees that I and other students pay don't go toward investing in weapons manufacturers. What's antisemitic about this?"

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Mr. Khalil's arrest made him the focus of protests. Signs from them decorate his apartment. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

Even operating on a few hours of sleep, Mr. Khalil spoke in fluid paragraphs as he related his personal history.

He was born and raised in a small refugee camp in southern Damascus to Palestinian parents and was taught, he said, to exercise his inherent right to free speech, even in a country with a repressive government, which he opposed. He fled Syria for Lebanon a week after his 18th birthday, having learned that two friends had been disappeared by government agents.

He studied computer science part time at the Lebanese American University in Beirut. In 2016, he met Noor Abdalla, an American woman of Syrian descent with whom he fell in love.

Around 2022, Mr. Khalil began applying to schools in the United States.

While he did not romanticize America, he believed that the country had strong institutions and a robust rule of law and that his speech would be protected.

"I came here with a clear understanding of freedom of expression," he said. "Even when it comes to Palestine. I never had any sort of

concern that speaking up for Palestine would actually get me in jail.”



Dr. Noor Abdalla spoke to rallies and protests in support of her husband. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

He enrolled at Columbia University in January 2023. Even before Hamas’s attacks on Israel on Oct. 7 of that year, he felt that the school practiced anti-Palestinian discrimination. When he sought to organize a lecture by a Human Rights Watch official focused on what he called apartheid in Israel, he said that the university administration gave him and the Palestinian Working Group, an organization for Palestinian students, a difficult time.

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By Oct. 7, he said, he felt he had a clear view of where the university stood. But he had also grown familiar with its administrators. In the spring of 2024, when students formed an encampment on a campus lawn, he negotiated with the administration on behalf of protesters demonstrating against a war that [has now killed more than 55,000 people in Gaza, according to the Gaza health ministry](#).

“Columbia is deeply committed to combating all forms of harassment and discrimination on our campus and ensuring all students feel safe and welcome,” a spokesman for the school said in a statement.

That spring, as protests and counterprotests disrupted campus life, Mr. Khalil began to feel concern for his safety. Though there appears to be no public record of his having expressed support for Hamas, whose attack on Israel began the war and killed more than 1,200 people, pro-Israeli websites began to portray him as “pro-Hamas” for his use of phrases such as [“from the river to the sea.”](#)

In the meantime, Mr. Khalil had married Dr. Abdalla, a dentist, and applied for permanent residency. In the summer of 2024, Dr. Abdalla became pregnant, and in November his green card came through.

Mr. Khalil’s fear for himself and his family spiked after President Trump’s election. After the president signed an executive order promising to combat campus antisemitism, groups that had targeted Mr. Khalil, including [Canary Mission and Betar](#), began to post about him again.

On March 8, he was returning from dinner at a friend’s house with Dr. Abdalla. According to court documents, when he unlocked the door to the building, two men wearing plainclothes followed them inside. Mr. Khalil was told he was being placed under arrest and Dr. Abdalla, who was then eight months pregnant, was threatened with arrest.



Footage filmed by Noor Abdalla, Mahmoud Khalil's wife, and posted by the American Civil Liberties Union shows the moment Khalil was detained by agents wearing plain clothes and badges. American Civil Liberties Union

"I asked for a warrant" Mr. Khalil recalled. The agents never showed him one.

The whole episode reminded him of the way government agents in Syria operated outside the law. "That's literally what made me flee," he said.

Initially, the agents told Mr. Khalil that his student visa had been canceled, which made no sense given that he was a permanent resident. He felt that he would be released as soon as the confusion was cleared up. But about five hours later, he was shown Mr. Rubio's determination that he was a foreign policy threat.

“It was very ironic. I literally laughed,” he said, adding, “What did I do that I’m a foreign policy threat to the United States? Did I, like, damage, the U.S.-Israeli relationship? Because it doesn’t appear so.”

Mr. Khalil was quickly transferred to New Jersey and then taken back to New York, told only that he was headed to Kennedy International Airport. He felt sure that he was being deported. Only when he was boarding a plane was he told he was being taken to Louisiana, more than 1,000 miles from his home.



After a judge granted him bail, Mr. Khalil was freed from a detention center in Jena, La. Annie Flanagan for The New York Times

Once in Jena, Mr. Khalil said he shared a room with more than 70 other men. He had no privacy and no knowledge of what would happen next. He was racked with concern for his wife and unborn child.

Mr. Khalil was “tortured by the uncertainty,” he said. “I tried my best to make a meaning out of my suffering there. I didn’t want to just sit around and wait for my fate to be decided.”

He began to spend his time helping other detainees communicate their needs to the authorities. He spent a few hours each day

translating questions into proper English about what had happened to the money in someone's commissary account, or why they hadn't received their medications.

He read "Man's Search for Meaning" by Viktor Frankl — a chronicle of life in a Nazi concentration camp — and "Unbuild Walls" by Silky Shah, a book describing the history of immigration policy and mass incarceration in the United States, as well as a few novels.

He felt joyful when he saw other pro-Palestinian students who had been detained go free. But the person who most occupied his mind was Dr. Abdalla, before and after she gave birth to a boy on April 21. Mr. Khalil's [requests to attend the delivery were denied.](#)



Mr. Khalil met his wife, Noor Abdalla, in Lebanon. The New York Times

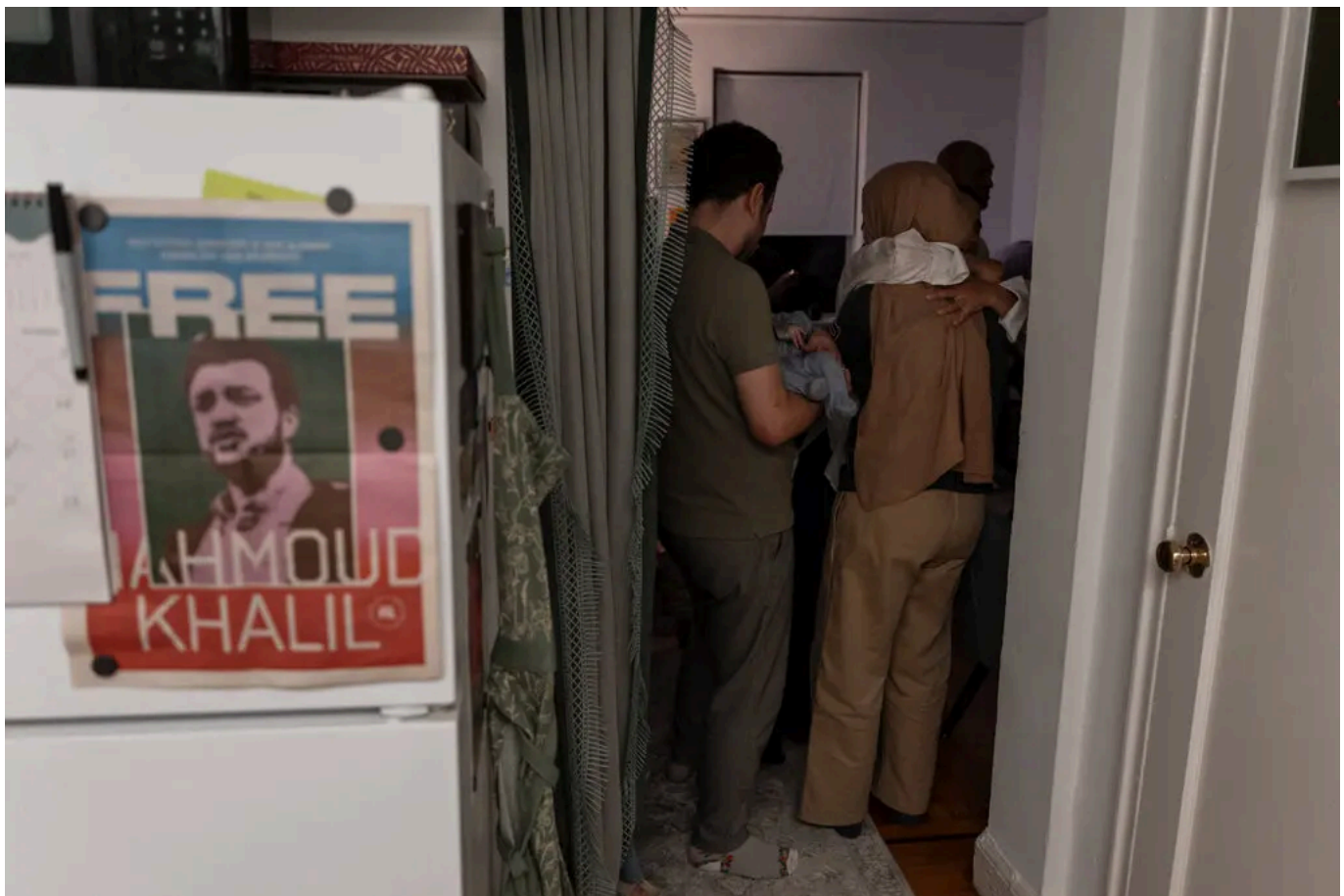
"I know how much Noor wanted me to be next to her while delivering the baby," he said, his voice catching. He said he tried to prepare himself for missing the birth, "but it was never enough in terms of managing my emotions, my thoughts about it."

He said that there was "nothing in this world that would compensate me for the time I lost with my family and witnessing the birth of my child."

In late May, the New Jersey federal judge overseeing his case, Michael E. Farbiarz, determined that the law Secretary Rubio had invoked was likely to be unconstitutional. This month, the judge barred the Trump administration from detaining Mr. Khalil on that basis and on Friday granted him bail.

Still, Mr. Khalil's detention broke his belief in American justice.

"If you have money, there is rule of law," he said. "If you are abiding by the very narrow definition of what this administration is defining an American value to be, you may get rule of law. Otherwise you have to fight tooth and nail to get your due process and your rights."



Mr. Khalil and Dr. Abdalla are at home together with their son after 105 days apart. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

He said that his having been freed in no way represented justice. "I'm free," he said, "but those who made me go through hell are still free outside and actually emboldened."

He intends to immediately resume his advocacy for Palestinian rights, as well as immigrant rights.

“I don’t think what happened to me would stop me,” he said. “If anything, it’s actually reinforced my belief that what we’re doing is right.”

A correction was made on June 22, 2025: An earlier version of this article misspelled the given name of the author of “Man’s Search for Meaning.” He is Viktor Frankl, not Victor.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

Jonah E. Bromwich covers criminal justice in the New York region for The Times. He is focused on political influence and its effect on the rule of law in the area’s federal and state courts.

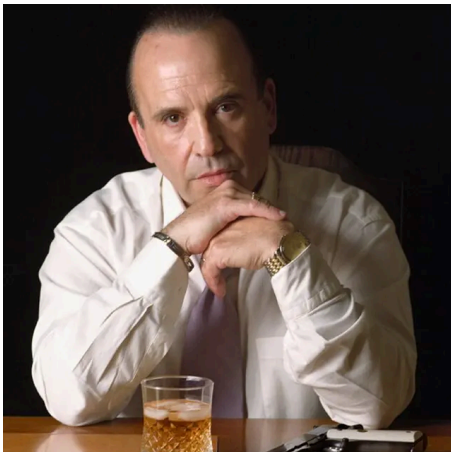
A version of this article appears in print on June 23, 2025, Section A, Page 14 of the New York edition with the headline: ‘It Felt Like Kidnapping,’ Bailed Columbia Activist Says of Detention. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today’s Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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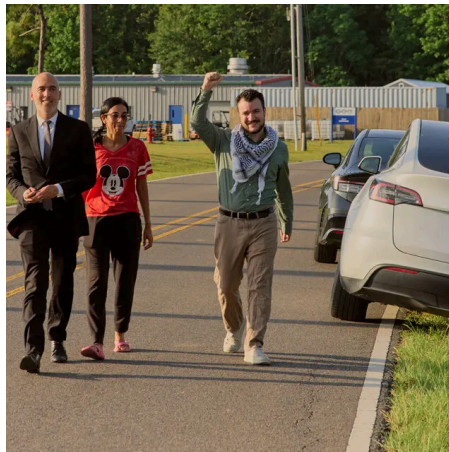
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